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Photos: China Turns On Futuristic 'Artificial Sun' Nuclear Fusion Reactor
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Just a week after turning on its first domestically designed fission nuclear reactor, China has made another major leap by powering up an experimental fusion reactor, which has the potential to provide gigantic amounts of electricity without radioactive waste.

On Friday, the HL-2M Tokamak reactor was turned on for the first time in Sichuan's capital of Chengdu, the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) announced.

[According to Xinhua News Agency](#), the experimental reactor generates plasma hotter than 150 million degrees Celsius by recreating the force that makes stars shine - nuclear fusion - which is why the reactor has been nicknamed China's "artificial sun."

In a fusion reaction, two hydrogen atoms combine to become a single helium atom, releasing colossal amounts of energy in the process - many times more energy than the inverse fission reaction, which powers conventional nuclear power plants by splitting big atoms such as uranium and plutonium.

Plus, where fission infamously creates destructive radiation alongside useful heat energy, a fusion reaction emits almost no radioactive particles or waves.

[According to the International Atomic Energy Agency \(IAEA\)](#), hydrogen fusion does produce an unstable radioactive isotope of hydrogen called tritium, which emits a beta particle capable of being repelled by human skin and which quickly dissipates, with the tritium being returned to the reactor's fuel supply as normal hydrogen. However, the longer-term effects of the reactor's structural material to high-energy neutrons is a problem not yet solved.

"It is fine for short-term operation," Wang Yugang, a professor of nuclear physics at Peking University, [told the South China Morning Post](#) about the HL-2M's design, adding that "[i]t will take a long time to find" the right material for decades of fusion reactor use.

The downside is that a fusion reaction is hard to keep going - really hard. In our sun, the weight of 332,000 Earths' worth of gas pushing down into the center of the star provides the pressure required to generate fusion, but in Chengdu, they have to generate a huge magnetic field to create the necessary conditions.

"The energy confinement time of international tokamak devices is less than one second. The shot discharge duration of the HL-2M is around 10 seconds, with an energy confinement time of a few hundred milliseconds," Yang Qingwei, chief engineer of the HL-2M at the Southwestern Institute of Physics under the CNNC, told Xinhua.

The tokamak reactor design was created by Soviet physicists in the late 1950s and uses a torus shape to create a stable plasma equilibrium.

The Communist Party official newspaper [People's Daily noted on Twitter](#) that fusion energy is key not only to China's strategic energy needs, but also to enabling environmentally sustainable development.

[According to AFP, Chinese scientists intend to use](#) the HL-2M reactor to collaborate with other scientists from 34 other countries who are also working on developing fusion power. In July, they began construction of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, another tokamak-style fusion reactor expected to be completed by 2025. [In a statement at the time](#), the scientists noted that “a pineapple-sized amount of this fuel [seawater] is the equivalent of 10,000 tons of coal.”

The debut of the HL-2M reactor comes just a week after another nuclear power first for China: the powering up of its first domestically designed nuclear reactor. On November 27, the No. 5 unit at the Fuqing Nuclear Power Plant, a conventional fission reactor named Hualong One, was [connected to the Chinese power grid, Sputnik reported](#).

“This marks China breaking the monopoly of foreign nuclear power technology and officially entering the technology’s first batch of advanced countries,” CNNC said at the time. With a half-dozen more reactors of the same type under construction, Hualong One will help China to meet its climate change-mitigation goal of becoming carbon-neutral by 2060.

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China Breaks Export Records as US Returns to COVID-19 Lockdowns, But Experts Warn Gains Won’t Last

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Having successfully controlled and eliminated the COVID-19 outbreaks in the country earlier this year, China’s economy has come roaring back as the year closes out. However, some experts warn the gains may only be temporary, as Western economies aren’t going to remain hamstrung by sanitary restrictions forever.

China’s General Administration of Customs reported Monday the country’s exports had risen by 21% in November as compared to the previous year. That is not only higher than October’s 11.4% increase, but also higher than the 12% increase economists had forecast for November, [the Wall Street Journal noted](#).

The vast majority of that increase came from trade with the United States, which increased by 46% last month. The Journal also calculated that China’s exports to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members increased by 10% and to the European Union by 8.6%.

Altogether, that gives the People’s Republic of China a \$75.4 billion trade surplus.

China’s exports to Australia, another country with which it has sparred over trade concerns in recent weeks, also rose dramatically last month, increasing by 22.6%.

But China didn’t just sell more last month; it bought more, too. Imports grew by 5% in November as compared to November 2019, but imports of Australian goods went up by 9.4%, [the South China Morning Post \(SCMP\) noted](#). Imports from the US increased by 33% as compared to a year ago.

In January, when China’s Wuhan was the only location with a COVID-19 outbreak, Washington and Beijing finalized Phase 1 of a historic trade deal that saw China agree to increase its purchases of US goods by \$200 billion over 2017 levels by the end of the year. However, [US](#)

[Department of Commerce statistics cited by Politico](#) suggest that China remained \$140 billion short of that goal by the end of October, the most recent month for which there is data. "COVID has temporarily increased the difficulty of decoupling from China – it was already incredibly difficult," Rory Green, China economist at TS Lombard, told SCMP, noting China makes many of the masks and gloves needed for safety as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage in the US and several other countries. However, many of the electronic devices now being bought as Christmas gifts in the West are also made in China, helping to drive exports up. "Many COVID-related purchases won't happen again and we eventually expect a global rotation from goods to services consumption as vaccine availability reduces the need for social distancing," Louis Kuijs, head of Asia economics [at Oxford Economics, told the Financial Times](#). "This will weigh on China's export performance relative to global demand, after the market share gains in 2020."

He predicted that in 2021, as COVID-19 vaccines begin their mass roll-outs, economic activity will return to normal, and China's gains will slacken.

Michael Pettis, a finance professor at Peking University, told the SCMP, "With the rest of the world also struggling with weak demand, I think trade tensions around the world can only get worse."

For the moment, however, skyrocketing cases in the US have brought the most stringent lockdowns since the spring, when the onset of the pandemic brought near-total economic paralysis as hundreds of millions of Americans began weekslong furloughs in a bid to stem the virus' spread.

[According to data collected by the US Centers](#) for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the seven-day average for COVID-19-related deaths is 2,171, and the seven-day new case average is at a record-breaking 191,615 per day. In the US state of California, which has an economy roughly the size of France's, [a new stay-at-home order has been issued](#) banning dining at restaurants, gatherings from multiple households and nonessential travel. The CDC has also [issued new advisories for mask-wearing indoors](#).

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Uber Pays Tech Startup to Take Over Troublesome Self-Driving Car Effort
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Uber has yet to have a year in the black, but that hasn't stopped it from effectively paying an Amazon-backed tech startup to take over its autonomous car development program, Uber ATG. In a bid to rid itself of a program that's brought it nothing but trouble, Uber has effectively paid Aurora Innovation \$400 million to take over its self-driving car effort. The deal spells the end of a five-year effort by Uber to develop an autonomous driving system that promised to give the ride-hailing service's profitability a huge boost.

Instead of selling Uber ATG to Aurora, Uber has handed over its equity in ATG and invested another \$400 million in Aurora, giving it a 26% stake in the company, [TechCrunch reported, citing a US Securities and Exchange Commission filing](#). Uber ATG is valued at \$7.25 billion,

with much of that coming from huge investments by Toyota, DENSO and SoftBank's Vision Fund.

The startup was founded in 2017 and has focused on building the underlying technologies necessary for self-driving cars to navigate without a human driver. It's backed by venture capital firm Sequoia Capital as well as Amazon.

Despite the high-profile backing, Uber's autonomous vehicle effort has been a truckload of headaches for the company. In 2018, a woman crossing the street in Tempe, Arizona, [was struck and killed by a Volvo XC90 self-driving SUV](#) in an incident ultimately ruled to have been caused by human error from the person in the driver's seat, not the self-driving system itself. Then in 2019, a former Uber executive, Anthony Levandowski, [pleaded guilty to nearly three dozen charges](#) of intellectual property theft related to Otto, a self-driving car startup he sold to Uber in 2016. Levandowski had previously headed up Waymo, Google's self-driving car effort. Whereas its fire sale of Uber ATG to Aurora represents a continuation of the trend of consolidating autonomous car development, Uber further consolidated the food courier service industry [by buying out Postmates last week](#), combining the company with its own UberEats service.

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Ghana Holds Elections for President, Parliament Amid Accusations of 'Flawed' Process
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Ghanaians headed to the polls on Monday to select their legislative representatives and head of state, although one of the candidates recently threatened to reject the results if fraudulent practices are found in the country's Electoral Commission.

Around 17 million Ghanaian voters will get to choose one of 12 presidential candidates as well as a total of 275 representatives to sit in the country's parliament.

Monday's election is the country's eighth since it transitioned to a multiparty democracy in 1992, but its first since the passing of a political titan of Ghanaian politics, J.J. Rawlings, who died last month. Rawlings came to power in Ghana in a 1979 military coup. He oversaw the transition to democracy in 1992 and won the presidency in the elections, then was re-elected in 1996.

[Sputnik reported last month that with Rawlings' death](#), former Ghanaian Special Prosecutor Martin Amidu felt he could no longer guarantee the independence of his office from the administration of Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo. The head of state, who appointed Amidu to chase down corruption in his administration in 2018, had recently pressured him to change his position in a report on a proposal to sell off much of the country's extensive gold futures on the London stock exchange - a plan called the Agyapa Deal.

Old Rivals

In Monday's election, Akufo-Addo, from the center-right New Patriotic Party (NPP), is being challenged by his predecessor, John Dramani Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), a leftist party founded by Rawlings. [According to Al Jazeera, it is the third time](#) the two men have run against one another, each vying for a second and final term as president.

In their first contest in 2012, Mahama just barely won following an eight-month battle in Ghana's Supreme Court over the veracity of the results, although Akufo-Addo returned to beat him in 2016.

Gold is just one issue on the ballot on Monday: Accra took out a \$1 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund in April, and both candidates have pledged to make the most of the cash via infrastructure investment.

In the election race, Akufo-Addo has played up his administration's record on expanding access to electricity and education and has promised to build a new airport in the center of the country. Mahama has promised more of the same kind of infrastructure projects as characterized his 2012-2017 presidency, and has promised to provide university students with free laptops.

Fears of Election Fraud Loom

However, the 2020 election is fraught with more than the usual political tensions. In October, Mahama drew attention to what he called a "flawed" electoral process, saying he might not respect the results if they're found to be fraudulent.

"We are not trouble makers. We want to make sure that all of us believe in this election so that if you win or lose, you are prepared to accept. But when we complain, they think that we are just causing trouble. This can lead this nation to chaos because I have said it, on December 7 when this election is flawed, we will not accept it," Mahama told a crowd of [his supporters in Abura, according to Modern Ghana](#).

"Who accepts a flawed election? Nobody," he said, adding, "And everything the Electoral Commission is doing is showing that we are heading to a flawed election."

The Electoral Commission (EC) had pledged to eliminate manual verification at polling stations, replacing it with Biometric Verification Devices. However, Mahama [warned that with just 33,000 devices set to roll out on Monday](#), this contest could have the most manual verification of any election held in the country.

Indeed, [Xinhua News Agency reported on Monday](#) that the EC reported removing some of its officials after discovering them tampering with ballot papers in Awutu Senya West and Bawku Central. The ballots reportedly had been torn out of the distribution booklet in such a way as to have omitted Akufo-Addo, who was placed at the bottom of the list.

EC Chair Jean Mensa has promised the results will be announced by Tuesday evening, which should bolster confidence in the system.

"We are promoting some efficiency into the system. We have worked with our numbers and we have a duration within which the results should be transmitted," [she told reporters in Accra on November 20](#), adding that "because of the efficiency we have introduced into the processes, we should be able to declare results within 24 hours."

'Peace Pact' Appears to Hold

Past elections have often seen vigilante groups hired by politicians to keep people away from the polls on election day, but a bipartisan 2019 law made vigilantism punishable with a minimum of 10 years in prison, [the BBC reported, adding that the law](#) "has so far been a deterrence judging from events leading to the election."

Still, there are more than a few fears of social unrest, and some 63,000 military and paramilitary officers had been deployed across the country as a preemptive measure.

Professor Kwesi Aning, who is the director of the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre in Accra, told Al Jazeera, "Though a

peace pact has been signed to deal, especially with the fallouts from the results, work needs to be done to sensitive grassroots supporters about the law and the need to respond to disputes legal.”

“The onus is on party leaders and structures. From history, there is a wide chasm between the flowery words of peace and the speed with which war drums are beaten when there are electoral disputes,” he added.

A risk of violence still hung over the election, however - not from vigilantes, but from separatists along the country’s eastern border with Togo from the Ewe people, an ethnic group that lives mostly in Togo.

[In September, a daring operation by a group](#) calling itself the Western Togoland Restoration Front staged a number of attacks on a bus terminal and several police stations in the eastern Volta Region and successfully blockaded all major entry points into the province with a series of protests.

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New Smartphone Tool to Track COVID-19 Vaccine Side Effects Vulnerable to Hacking - Health Experts
by [Mary F.](#)

With the COVID-19 pandemic having infected more than 67 million people and killed more than 1.5 million globally, health officials are scrambling to get a viable vaccine approved to help slow the spread of the deadly disease.

The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has developed a new smartphone technology called V-safe that can provide real-time warnings of side effects in the first Americans who receive a vaccination against the virus. According to a [presentation by the CDC](#), the purpose of the messaging tool is to provide safety assessments of coronavirus vaccines so that officials can quickly identify any safety issues linked to the drugs.

However, some health and technology experts are concerned that the technology, which can be accessed by patients who receive the vaccine through a QR code, could be used by hackers or anti-vaccine activists to create false or misleading reports on vaccine safety, [the Washington Post first reported](#), citing anonymous officials.

Officials are concerned about the technology's safety because anyone with access to the QR code, regardless of whether they received the vaccine or not, could use the system to file false reports about the time. One US federal health official told the Post that the tool’s vulnerability to misinformation is a “potential risk.” Another official said that there are safeguards to prevent false information from being spread, but using such safeguards “eats up time” that could be used to look into real adverse events linked to COVID-19 vaccines. Although officials could technically identify whether a participant filing a report is a vaccine recipient by cross-checking information in a master database, that process would need to be conducted manually.

“With any widely available technology, there’s an opportunity for people to use spoofing and other nefarious techniques,” Ed Simcox, former chief technology officer at the US Department of

Health and Human Services and current chief strategy officer at software company LifeOmic, told the Post. “That would undermine what is so potentially valuable about this system — going directly to patients, or citizens, to get their feedback about multiple vaccines administered in diverse settings.”

According to the CDC, V-safe will send text messages to early recipients of the vaccines daily for the first seven days after they receive a vaccine and then weekly for one and a half months post-vaccination. The texts will redirect users to web-based surveys that ask about their symptoms and pose questions like “Did you miss work?” and “Were you unable to do certain daily activities?”

There are already [reports suggesting](#) that some people, especially those in Black and Latino communities, are hesitant about getting a COVID-19 vaccine once it’s available over concerns about such a drug’s safety, raising additional concerns about V-safe being used to spread false information about vaccines.

“I think the devil is in the details here on how exactly this is implemented,” Gunther Eysenbach, editor of the Journal of Medical Internet Research, told the Post. “A fair bit of marketing is also needed so people don’t have fear about privacy.”

“That’s a topic that we have actively been asking CDC for more information on,” noted Imelda Garcia, associate commissioner for laboratory and infectious-disease services at the Texas Department of State Health Services. “Obviously safety and risk communication are absolutely paramount when we’re talking about a novel vaccine.”

According to the CDC, the agency is hopeful that state and local leaders as well as medical providers will advocate the software and raise awareness about its safeguards.

However, some health officials are also concerned that not rolling out the application early to health care providers and other public health workers - those responsible for promulgating the mass vaccination campaign - will deny them the important opportunity of seeing how the application works firsthand before it’s disseminated for public use.

Tom Shimabukuro, deputy director of the CDC’s immunization safety office, told an advisory panel last week that the CDC is “reaching that time where we’re really going to be pushing out strongly and trying to get the message out as broadly as possible,” the Post reported.

V-safe was developed through a partnership between the Department of Health and Human Services and Oracle, a US multinational computer technology corporation. It is designed to enhance other vaccine warning systems like the [Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System \(VAERS\)](#) that also gathers information on adverse side effects following vaccination.

US states are preparing to distribute a vaccine this month. Both pharmaceutical companies Moderna and Pfizer have completed phase 3 clinical trials of their vaccines and have applied for emergency approval for their vaccines from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

While Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech [requested emergency use authorization](#) for their vaccine candidate from the FDA earlier this month after finding the drug to be 95% effective against the virus, Moderna, which has developed a vaccine that is 94% effective in preventing COVID-19, announced it had filed for emergency FDA authorization last week.

Russia has already approved a vaccine for the virus. The drug, [named Sputnik V](#), has 91.4% efficacy 28 days after the first dose and a 95% efficacy 42 days after the first dose.

Last week, the UK [approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for emergency use](#).

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Biden Plans to Announce US Defense Secretary Pick on Friday
by [Mary F.](#)

Projected US President-elect Joe Biden is facing mounting pressure within his own Democratic Party over whom to select as his defense secretary, with Black leaders urging him to select an African American and others encouraging him to choose a woman.

Biden on Monday revealed that he plans to announce his pick for US defense secretary on Friday.

The leading female candidate for the role is Michele Flournoy, a defense policy adviser and former government official who served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy under former US President Bill Clinton and as under secretary of defense for policy for former US President Barack Obama's administration.

However, a coalition of at least seven progressive groups has urged Biden to avoid Flournoy in an open letter [viewed by the Associated Press](#) (AP). In the letter, the coalition warns Biden that Flournoy, with an "opaque history of private-sector activity," has a record of "ill-advised policy decisions," referencing Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Afghanistan.

"Ms. Flournoy's consistent support for military interventions has contributed to devastating crises around the world, including in Yemen," Jehan Hakim, chair of the Yemeni Alliance Committee, wrote in the letter, AP reported.

Other potential contenders for the role include retired Army General Lloyd Austin and Jeh Johnson, a former US secretary of homeland security, both of whom are Black. Johnson also served as the general counsel of the Department of Defense during the early years of the Obama administration.

According to three people with knowledge on the matter who spoke to [Politico](#), Austin is now a leading contender for the position. Although Johnson is also being considered for the job, two sources, one of whom is a House Democratic aide, told the outlet that there are concerns about Johnson's tenure under Obama. Johnson has been criticized for scaling up family detention and deportations of undocumented immigrants and approving drone strikes that injured or killed civilians.

Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MO), a Congressional Black Caucus member, revealed to Politico that "if either [Austin or Johnson] were selected, [she] would be happy."

"A lot of people are anxiously awaiting to see what the Cabinet looks like once it's completed, but also note the fact that the African American numbers need to be better than what they are at this point," Thompson added.

The Biden team believes that Austin may be the safe choice, one former defense official with knowledge on the matter also told Politico.

"His star is rising," the official noted, adding that Austin would be the "controlled option."

However, others have argued that Austin, who has not been out of the military for the required seven years and would need a waiver from Congress to become secretary of defense, is a poor choice.

"From a civil-military relations perspective, this seems like a terrible idea," tweeted Rosa Brooks, a former Pentagon official. "Lots of damage during the Trump era. Especially after Mattis, Kelly, McMaster, Flynn ... putting a recently retired 4 star, no matter how wonderful, into the top civilian DoD [Department of Defense] position sends the worst possible message."

Biden has already revealed his picks for his national security team: Tony Blinken for secretary of state, Alejandro Mayorkas for homeland security secretary, Jake Sullivan for national security adviser, Linda Thomas-Greenfield as the US ambassador to the United Nations, Janet Yellen as the designated secretary of the Treasury and Wally Adeyemo as the deputy secretary of the Treasury, [The Hill reported](#).

Also on Monday, Biden told reporters that he plans to name his pick for attorney general this week as well, [MarketWatch reported](#). Moreover, a transition official also noted Monday that Biden will announce the nominees for his economic and domestic cabinet before the end of this week and additional members of his cabinet before Christmas, Reuters reported.

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Americans' Mental Health Ratings Plummet to 20-Year Low as Pandemic Persists - Poll
by [Mary F.](#)

Given a tumultuous election year amid a global pandemic that has killed more than 1 million people, it's unsurprising that many Americans' mental health is deteriorating. Even before the pandemic struck, mental illness among American adults was increasing, according to Mental Health America, a nonprofit that works to promote mental well-being.

Since 2001, Gallup has asked Americans - as part of a November Health and Healthcare survey - to rate their [mental or emotional well-being](#) as "excellent," "good," "only fair" or "poor."

A [new poll released by Gallup](#) reveals that Americans' mental health is currently worse than it has been at any point in the last 20 years. Only 76% of US adults say their mental health is "excellent" or "good," representing a nine-point decrease since last year. Even though the majority of Americans do still report excellent or good mental health, the latest poll is concerning, since it demonstrates a decrease in the excellent and good ratings.

According to Gallup, the decline in positive ratings is "undoubtedly influenced by the coronavirus pandemic, which continues to profoundly disrupt people's lives, but may also reflect views of the election and the state of race relations, both of which were on Americans' minds this year."

The survey also found that the decline in Americans' mental well-being differed across demographic subgroups, with women, Republicans, independents, those who attend religious services less than weekly, unmarried people, white adults, older adults and lower-income Americans all seeing double-digit point drops in the percentage of people rating their mental health as excellent since last year. Democrats and those who frequently attend church showed the smallest decline in mental health ratings.

However, Gallup also points out that the "subgroups showing the greatest declines in excellent mental health are not necessarily the groups with the lowest positive ratings," noting that more

Republicans and independents say they have excellent mental health compared to Democrats, while women rated their mental well-being more poorly than men.

This is not the first survey to indicate a deterioration in mental health ratings this year among Americans. April [research](#) from Gallup's ongoing COVID-19 tracking survey found that 15% of US adults at the time reported harm to their emotional or mental health due to social distancing and other lockdown measures.

Also in April, Gallup found that the percentage of US adults who [consider themselves "thriving"](#) in their lives had dropped to 46.4%, which is the same low point measured during the Great Recession in November 2008.

Despite the fact that Americans' mental well-being has deteriorated notably this past year, the same cannot be said for their self-reported physical health. The [latest Gallup poll](#) shows that 79% of Americans say their physical health is excellent or good, similar to the 81% of Americans who reported the same thing last year. These numbers are also close to the averages across the last two decades, Gallup noted.

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US Military College Removes Post-Civil War Statue of Confederate Gen. Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Board members of the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) approved the removal in October, shortly after a story published in the Washington Post argued Black cadets "still endure relentless racism" at the military college.

VMI's post-Civil War statue honoring notorious Confederate Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was plucked from its acropolis in Lexington, Virginia, around 9:45 a.m. local time on Monday. A modest crowd formed near the cadet battery as the controversial bronze statue began its \$209,000 relocation to the Virginia Museum of the Civil War and New Market Battlefield State Historical Park in nearby New Market, Virginia, [according to WDBJ7](#). The costly move is reportedly being funded by the school's facility maintenance and operations account.

The Board of Visitors at VMI, the oldest state-supported military college in the US, announced in late October that the statue celebrating Jackson would be leaving the campus - nearly 110 years after it was unveiled by sculptor Moses Ezekiel.

Ezekiel was a veteran of the Battle of New Market before making history as VMI's first Jewish cadet.

"VMI, like all aspects of society, must honestly address historical inequities and be intentional about creating a better future. We care deeply about the individual experiences of all of our cadets and alumni," said Board of Visitors President John William "Bill" Boland in a [statement obtained by the Associated Press](#).

The decision has been viewed as a direct response to a [Washington Post article by Ian Shapira](#) that slammed the school's problematic praise of Jackson. Citing VMI alumnus Kaleb Tucker,

who is Black, the article revealed that first-year cadets have traditionally been forced to salute the statue of the Confederate general.

Shapira emphasized that Jackson was more than just a professor at the military college - he was also an "enslaver of six people."

"They were asking us to commemorate people on the wrong side of history and to celebrate people who wanted African Americans in bondage, raped and enslaved," argued VMI alumna Carroll Foy, who is also Black.

"Winchester photo" of Jackson. The original portrait is owned by the Virginia Military Institute [Allegations raised in the publication](#) triggered a [\\$1 million probe](#) backed by the Virginia General Assembly.

The [Washington Post's reporting](#) on the matter also led to the resignation of VMI's superintendent, retired US Army Gen. J.H. Binford Peay III, who [proclaimed in a July memo](#) that the school had no intention of renaming any buildings or removing any statues from the campus.

Peay III went on to praise Jackson as a "military genius," VMI professor and Mexican War veteran.

"Throughout the years, the primary focus on honoring VMI's history has been to celebrate principles of honor, integrity, character, courage, service, and selflessness of those associated with the institute. It is not to in anyway condone racism, much less slavery," he wrote.

Anti-racist protests ignited earlier this year following the May 25 police slaying of George Floyd, an unarmed Black resident of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Local governments and entities, such as VMI, have responded to these calls for racial equality via their own [symbolic denunciations of slavery](#) and the [Confederate States of America](#), which fought to maintain the enslavement of Africans.

A statue of former US President Thomas Jefferson, for example, was [toppled by demonstrators in Portland, Oregon](#). Historians have documented that Jefferson was responsible for the enslavement of hundreds of individuals, including Sally Hemings, an enslaved, mixed-race woman who was raped by Jefferson and also gave birth to their child.

"Slave owner" and "George Floyd" were seen tagged on the statue's acropodium.

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Trump Adviser Peter Navarro Violated Hatch Act 'on Several Occasions' - Special Counsel by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Hatch Act of 1939, An Act to Prevent Pernicious Political Activities, prohibits civil servants in the executive branch of the US federal government from engaging in partisan political activity.

The Office of Special Counsel advised in 2019 that White House counselor Kellyanne Conway be terminated over repeated violations.

Special Counsel Henry Kerner [issued a memo Monday](#) saying that Dr. Peter Navarro, an economist who serves as assistant to the president and director of Office for Trade and Manufacturing Policy, "engaged in prohibited political activity."

Citing investigative findings from the US Office of Special Counsel (OSC), the issuance addressed to US President Donald Trump detailed Navarro "violated the Hatch Act on several occasions when he engaged in political activity in his official capacity."

Kerner noted the Trump administration official provided no comment to the OSC when given the opportunity to respond to the probe's results.

The accompanying investigation documents highlighted Navarro, while acting as head of the Office for Trade and Manufacturing Policy, "repeatedly attacked 2020 presidential candidate Joe Biden during official media interviews."

Democratic vice-presidential nominee Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) was also disparaged by the Trump administration official. The investigation found that, on at least one occasion, [Navarro referred to Harris](#) as a "mouthpiece" who "knows nothing about China policy."

"His campaign rhetoric was intended to harm Mr. Biden's presidential candidacy and encourage viewers not to vote for him in the 2020 election," the OSC assessed.

"By using his official platform as a high-level White House official to engage in these partisan attacks, Dr. Navarro violated the Hatch Act's prohibition against using his official authority or influence to affect an election."

The economist-turned-civil servant is one of more than a dozen Trump administration officials accused of being in clear violation of the 1939 federal law.

In October alone, at least 16 officials in the US president's administration violated the Hatch Act, according to a [November 2 report from Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington \(CREW\)](#). The 16 civil servants allegedly racked up more than 60 cumulative violations.

"Trump has been openly dismissive of the Hatch Act and didn't fire Conway when OSC recommended it," CREW Deputy Director Donald Sherman said in October, [The Guardian reported](#). "This administration has committed Hatch Act violations of a greater scope, scale and frequency than any administration in recent memory."

CREW and Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr. (D-NJ) separately voiced their concerns to the special counsel around the November 3 presidential election. [The latter accused the US president](#) of "using the White House and Old Executive Office Building as a campaign command center and election day war room."

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'People Already Hate Me': UK Mom Acquitted in Underage Sex Trial Now Eyeing OnlyFans Career
by [Evan Craighead](#)

A majority male jury found the 32-year-old woman "not guilty" of knowingly having sex with an underage teenager. While the mother of three did have sex with the 14-year-old boy, the defense successfully argued the teen's falsified date of birth on social media was indicative of his propensity to lie about his age.

Teah Vincent, the Gloucestershire mother who recently appeared in Gloucester Crown Court over child sex allegations, revealed to her Instagram followers that she may soon cash in on her

salacious public image via OnlyFans, a subscription-based platform that primarily features amateur adult content.

"I'm thinking about doing an OnlyFans account," she floated [in an emotional video post](#). "People already hate me, so not much to lose."

The 32-year-old has used social media to document the "s****y two-year nightmare" that has resulted from her October 21, 2018, encounter with a boy she allegedly believed was over the age of 16.

Prosecutor Christopher Smyth told the court that Vincent began her predatory encounter by offering two teen boys water following an afternoon of recreational football, [The Sun reported](#). After arriving at her home nearby, the woman quickly came on to the younger teen, who allegedly told the mother of three that he was only 14 and still in school.

Smyth asserted the underage boy "had a strong feeling that the situation was not right," as Vincent was "more than twice his age."

"In the end he pushed her off, got dressed and fled downstairs. The victim's friend said that he'd heard sexual sounds coming down the stairs," he detailed. "He felt awkward and he left the house for a short while before returning. He said that he felt his friend had been an idiot."

"It didn't occur to me that he might be underage," the 32-year-old told the court, [as reported by The Mirror](#). "He definitely didn't tell me he was in Year 9, or that he was only 14, before we had sex."

Vincent claimed she "didn't force" the teen to have sex, although she did initiate the sexual encounter. After the act, the two engaged in casual banter that quickly let the 32-year-old know "he was not in the sixth form" and was actually only 14 years old.

"I think he panicked when he revealed his age being 14 ... I'm angry with myself and I am angry with them for lying about their ages," Vincent claimed. "If I had known the truth at the time I wouldn't be here in court now."

Vincent was arrested on October 26, 2018, not even a week after the incident.

"Can you be sure he told her he was 14 before they had sex or had he lied about his age?"

Vincent's attorney Catherine Flint asked the jury of eight men and four women. "You'd be hard-pressed to find a young teenager who doesn't wish they were a few years older."

The defense team bolstered their argument with the teen's Facebook profile, which used a fake date of birth to make him appear "much older" than 14 years old, [according to The Sun](#).

During closing arguments, Flint informed the jury that they must put aside their personal feelings of whether the 32-year-old's behavior was "morally questionable" and instead focus on the facts of the encounter.

"Your role is not to make moral judgments, but to decide if she broke the law," the [attorney stated](#).

Jurors deliberated 64 minutes before clearing Vincent of the underage sex crime. A number of netizens have denounced the ruling as sexist and unfair toward male survivors of sexual violence.

"The fact is I've been acquitted by a jury and people need to respect that. It's time for me to try and rebuild my life and just get on with it," the mother of three said on Facebook, [as reported by the New York Post](#).

Despite the court decision falling in her favor, Vincent says the viral incident has "wrecked" her life and any chances she once had at a career.

At the same time, OnlyFans may be a profitable pursuit for Vincent, as the website has proven to be a lucrative platform for solo adult content creators. Not to mention, the platform is responsible for age verification, which - as far as sex goes - would take a lot of pressure off the 32-year-old.

OnlyFans has received a massive boom in traffic within the past year, producing a community of 85 million users and more than a million content creators. The subscription-based platform has seen an estimated \$2 billion in sales amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, [according to Bloomberg](#).

OnlyFans is projected to see \$400 million in annual net sales this year while dwarfing subscription platform competitors like Patreon, a site valued at \$1.2 billion and geared toward creatives seeking to monetize their work.

While Vincent's potential revenue is unlikely to rival celebrity juggernauts like Cardi B and Bella Thorne, the 32-year-old's notoriety would likely translate to greater exposure and more subscribers, giving her a leg-up against other amateur content creators.

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'Never Gonna Happen': Twitter Roasts Ivanka for Sharing Image of Trump Alongside Mount Rushmore
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

South Dakota's Mount Rushmore National Memorial features four 60-foot tall granite sculptures of former US Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. The project was completed in 1941 and saw over 400 individuals participate in the carvings.

Ivanka Trump, US President Donald Trump's daughter who also serves as a White House adviser, prompted netizens to go running for their pitchforks on Monday after she shared an image on Twitter that showed her father alongside the visages on Mount Rushmore.

The Twitter post reads: "Amazing photo of [Trump] during his visit to Mount Rushmore on July 3, 2020." The picture itself has [strong likeness to another image](#) that was previously shared by the commander-in-chief in August.

However, within seconds of the posting being shared, netizens were ready to offer their own opinions on the matter, with many quick to bash Ivanka for even hinting at the possibility of adding her father's face to the memorial.

"Forever impeached, forever a legacy of complete and utter failure. Imagine being this proud of it," [one user commented](#), as another remarked that such an addition to Mount Rushmore was "[never gonna happen](#)."

But not all users were quick to reject the suggestion, as one netizen commented, "if there ever was a president that deserved to be on Mount Rushmore, it's your father."

Talks of Trump being added to the historic sculpture first began to emerge ahead of Trump's July 4 celebrations, which were scheduled to take place at the site despite the COVID-19

pandemic. At the time, Trump used his appearance at the monument to [glorify the US' history and reject calls to topple statues](#).

Later in August, the rumor mill went into overdrive after the [New York Times reported](#) that a White House aide had reached out to the office of South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem to inquire about the steps needed in order to add Trump's face to the national memorial.

Trump later denied the claims and tweeted out that the allegations were baseless; however, he did state in a tweet that his likeness being added "[sounds like a good idea to me](#)."

According to the [US National Park Service](#), Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln were chosen as the project's subjects in an effort to represent the nation's birth, growth, development and preservation.

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Christmas Holiday Could Be Worse Than Thanksgiving for US COVID-19 Spread, Says Fauci by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Prior to the Thanksgiving holiday, multiple health experts and agencies warned Americans against traveling and gathering with families amid the COVID-19 pandemic; however, as many ignored the call, officials are now growing increasingly concerned that the upcoming holidays may see the respiratory disease surge even further in the weeks to come.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, who serves as a member of the White House coronavirus task force and the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, warned on Monday that the Christmas holiday would likely be far worse than Thanksgiving when it comes to spreading SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

For Fauci, the difference is largely because the Christmas holiday is far longer than that of Thanksgiving, when families often gather for a short stay before returning home ahead of the new work week.

"With Thanksgiving, you know, it was just the end of the week and then you go back to work the next week," Fauci [explained to CNN's "New Day" during an interview](#). "With Christmas, it starts several days before and it goes through Christmas" and into the New Year's holiday.

"I think it could be even more of a challenge than what we saw with Thanksgiving," he continued, noting that the situation is at a "very critical time in this country right now. We've got to not walk away from the facts and the data. This is tough going for all of us."

The US reported more single-day records on Sunday after roughly 176,771 new COVID-19 cases were documented and the number of currently hospitalized patients hit 101,487, according to [figures released by the COVID Tracking Project](#).

Of those hospitalized, some 20,145 individuals have been admitted to an intensive care unit.

Approximately 7,094 were placed on a ventilator. As for the COVID-19 death toll, it reached 1,138 on Sunday, nearly half of the seven-day average reported by officials.

Recalling earlier warnings and data released by agencies, Fauci also indicated that he was "not surprised" by the current surge in coronavirus reports.

"It was predictable," [Fauci said](#), stressing that a combination of the cold weather and the holiday season is only going to promote the virus' spread. "We had a high baseline of cases to begin with. Even at the time when things seemed to have been calming down, it never got down to a low baseline."

However, it's not all doom and gloom. The health official emphasized that if individuals continue to stay in line with preventive measures such as wearing a mask and maintaining social distancing, case numbers are likely to drop.

Fauci's warnings come just days after the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued guidance on Friday that called for "[universal face mask use](#)," even inside one's home should a member of the household have been infected by or exposed to the virus.

At present, the US' total COVID-19 case count has exceeded 14.8 million, [according to Johns Hopkins University](#). The states reporting the highest daily tallies are, in order, California, Texas, New York, Florida and Illinois.

Forecasts released by the CDC suggest that in the week ending December 26, [up to 1.7 million new COVID-19 cases](#) may be documented in the US, and the death toll could reach [roughly 329,000 over the next few weeks](#).

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'Humanity is Not Ready Yet': Ex-Israeli Space Security Head Claims Aliens Exist, Signed Deal With US
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Haim Eshed served as the head of Israeli's space security program for nearly 30 years and has been given the Israel Security Award on three separate occasions by an Israeli president. The now-87-year-old professor retired from Israel's Ministry of Defense in 2011.

Eshed, who retired with a lieutenant colonel military rank, [recently claimed in an interview](#) with the Yedioth Ahronoth outlet that not only do extraterrestrials exist, but they also signed an agreement with the US government "to do experiments."

In a [translation provided by the Jewish Press](#), the former space security head explained that the alleged aliens "are researching and trying to understand the whole fabric of the universe, and they want [humans] as helpers."

"They have been waiting for humanity to evolve and reach a stage where we will generally understand what space and spaceships are," Eshed said, before adding that the cooperation has even reportedly expanded to the red planet, where no human has officially stepped foot.

"There's an underground base in the depths of Mars, where their representatives are, and also our American astronauts."

Asked why this information hasn't been revealed before, Eshed stated that officials opted to not release it because the alleged "UFOs have asked not to publish that they are here." He added that "humanity is not ready yet."

However, he did indicate that US President Donald Trump "was on the verge of revealing [their existence] but the aliens in the Galactic Federation [said] 'Wait, let people calm down first.'"

"They don't want to start mass hysteria," he continued. "They want to first make us sane and understanding."

Acknowledging that his remarks do come across as far-fetched, Eshed further said that he would have been "hospitalized" had he "come up with what [he's] saying today five years ago." The former Israeli government official noted that he decided to voice the allegations now simply because the academic landscape has changed.

"Today they're already talking differently. I have nothing to lose. I've received my degrees and awards, I am respected in universities abroad, where the trend is also changing," he said. Incidentally, Eshed's commentary also comes alongside the release of a new book in which he discusses the cosmos.

Earlier this year, the US Department of Defense announced that it had established a task force to [specifically investigate unidentified aerial phenomena](#) so as to have a better understanding of them and to gain insight into such occurrences. The task force's establishment came a few months after the [US Navy made public three videos](#) in which unidentified flying objects were caught by cameras aboard US military aircraft.

Recently, former US President Barack Obama was [asked about UFOs during an interview](#) with comedian and late-night television host Stephen Colbert. Although Obama never spilled the beans on whether or not aliens were in fact real, he did indicate that he "certainly asked about it."

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Joe Biden Chooses Retired General Lloyd Austin as Defence Secretary, Reports Claim by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Reports emerged in late November that retired four-star US Army Gen. Lloyd Austin had been added to a list of nominees that had the potential to serve as projected US President-elect Joe Biden's defence secretary.

Citing three individuals with knowledge of the decision, [Politico reported late Monday](#) that Biden had reportedly selected Austin to serve as the next leader to the US Department of Defence. The report also notes that Biden had been considering Jeh Johnson, who previously served as the homeland security secretary from 2013 to 2017, but that Austin was ultimately picked as a result of Johnson's ties to expanding family detentions and deportations, among other concerns. A former defence official who spoke to the outlet noted that the Biden team felt that Austin was by far the safest choice for the job when compared to Johnson and Michèle Flournoy, a defense policy adviser who was also a contender for the position.

"There would be less tension [with Austin]," the unidentified official said. "Maybe less disagreement ... the relationship would be smoother."

The revelation comes just hours [after reports emerged earlier in the day](#) that Biden would be officially announcing his pick on Friday. Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MO), a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, had earlier remarked to Politico that while there is a lot of interest

in seeing the makeup of the Biden administration, there ultimately needed to be more African Americans in the Cabinet.

Despite views of Austin being the "safe" pick among the candidates, he still faces an uphill battle ahead of his potential confirmation, since he presently does not meet the requirement that states a military official must be out of the armed forces for a period of at least seven years before being appointed to such a position.

Congressional lawmakers previously issued a waiver on the requirement for former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis; however, there is now a growing sentiment against issuing such clearance. The seven-year rule has been implemented in an effort to ensure civilian control of US defence.

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Video: Florida Police Raid Home of US Scientist Who Accused State of Manipulating COVID-19 Data
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Rebekah Jones previously worked as a data scientist at Florida's Department of Health and was praised early on during the pandemic for creating the Sunshine State's COVID-19 dashboard; however, not long after, she was dismissed from her post over alleged insubordination. Jones, who [moved to launch her own COVID-19 dashboard](#) after the unexpected firing, revealed late Monday via Twitter that her home was raided by several law enforcement officials earlier in the day.

In a Twitter thread, Jones noted that officials arrived at her home at about 8:30 a.m. local time to serve a search warrant in line with a complaint that was filed by the state's Department of Health.

Video of the intense interaction shows Jones opening her front door and being immediately ushered out as at least three officers are seen entering the grounds and calling on Jones' husband to meet them at the home's entrance. Jones is overheard saying that her two children are also at the residence.

After conducting a deep pass through her home, officials ultimately left with all of the hardware Jones uses to keep her alternative COVID-19 dashboard running.

"They took my phone and the computer I use every day to post the case numbers in Florida, and the school cases for the entire country," [reads a tweet published by Jones](#). They took evidence of corruption at the state level. They claimed it was about a security breach."

"This was [Florida Gov. Ron] DeSantis. He sent the gestapo," Jones added, stressing that the raid is an example of "[what happens to scientists who do their job honestly](#)" or individuals "who speak truth to power."

"If DeSantis thought pointing a gun in my face was a good way to get me to shut up, he's about to learn just how wrong he was. I'll have a new computer tomorrow. And then I'm going to get back to work," she continued.

Gretl Plessinger, a spokesperson for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, confirmed the raid in a [statement to the Sun-Sentinel](#), explaining that the warrant was executed as part of a November 10 probe into an alleged unauthorized access to the state's emergency alert system. Plessinger said that agents suspected that someone at Jones' home had "illegally" tapped into the emergency messaging system. "As in all cases, our role is to determine the facts of what happened, and a state attorney determines whether or not charges are filed," the statement added.

Citing the search warrant, the outlet reported that the [November 10 incident](#) saw nearly 2,000 text messages deployed to the public through the emergency system that read: "It's time to speak up before another 17,000 people are dead. You know this is wrong. You don't have to be a part of this. Be a hero. Speak out before it's too late."

Jones has rejected the allegations, telling the Sun-Sentinel that she has "never had access to that system" and that she is "not a hacker."

The investigation is ongoing.

Jones had served as the geographic information system manager for the department's Disease Control and Health Protection Division until officials dismissed her in May. [According to the Miami Herald](#), Jones was given the pink slip for "insubordination" after she complained about the state's lack of transparency and alleged [manipulation of its COVID-19 data](#).

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US, Japan Pledge to Help Vietnam Develop Liquefied Natural Gas Fields - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan and Vietnam have issued a joint pledge to help Hanoi develop its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) reserves, the three countries said in a joint statement issued in Washington by the Department of State.

"[The three parties acknowledged] the importance of cooperation between Japan and the United States in Vietnam, especially, under the concept of the Japan-US Strategic Energy Partnership (JUSEP)," the statement said on Monday.

The statement was released by the three governments of the 2020 Trilateral Vietnam-US-Japan Commercial Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Forum, the State Department said.

Developing Vietnam's LNG resources would also promote Hanoi's energy transition and help meet the goals of strengthening energy security, addressing the global climate issues, and promoting economic growth, the statement added.

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UPDATE - Pfizer, Moderna Will Not Attend Trump's 'Vaccine Summit' - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Pfizer and Moderna, the two major pharmaceutical manufacturers expected to soon receive federal approval for emergency use of their coronavirus vaccines, will not attend President Donald Trump's vaccine summit in the White House on Tuesday, a senior administration official told reporters.

Earlier in the day, STAT News reported that Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla and Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel were both invited to attend the gathering but turned down invitations. The senior official refuted this, saying that attendance of the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) top regulatory official, Peter Marks', forced the White House reshuffle plans to avoid a conflict of interest.

"There's a question about vaccine companies -- Pfizer and Moderna -- and their participation [in the summit]. We were in discussion with them in the planning process. Ultimately, the determination was, we had Peter Marks of the FDA participating and there was a change of direction in light of the fact that we would have the regulator participating in the event, it was more appropriate not to have the vaccine companies with pending applications before the FDA also participating in that event," the senior official said on Monday.

The White House deemed that the participation of Marks, the Director of the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research and the man who will ultimately make the final determination on Pfizer's and Moderna's Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) applications, would go further towards instilling confidence in a vaccine than attendance by pharmaceutical reps, a second administration official added.

The officials also countered a New York Times report that alleged the Trump administration passed up an opportunity to procure additional doses of the Pfizer vaccine. An administration official said that the administration could not have been offered 400 million doses of a vaccine while it was in the pre-clinical phase.

The Trump administration has publicly clashed with Pfizer in recent weeks over its involvement in the administration's Operation Warp Speed and the timing of a data release showing its vaccine to be highly effective, the initial report had said.

Trump has repeatedly claimed credit that the new vaccines were developed in record time and for making plans for the vaccines' delivery throughout the United States.

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PREVIEW - US States Face 'Safe Harbor' Vote Certification Deadline as Trump Continues Legal Fight

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The Trump re-election campaign continues to wage its legal war in key battleground states as the deadline for states to certify election results looms Tuesday.

US law requires all state election disputes, including recounts and legal challenges, to be resolved by Tuesday. It is called safe harbor because it provides time to ensure there are no issues when the Electoral College proceedings take place on December 14.

So far, 47 US states have certified results except Missouri, New Jersey, and Hawaii, which are not currently being contested by President Donald Trump's legal team.

A candidate must receive 270 electoral votes to become US president. As of Monday afternoon, Biden has 306 certified electoral votes and Trump has 221.

The Trump campaign and Republican party have lost more than 40 legal challenges in key battleground states, including Michigan, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Nevada, and Arizona.

Trump has claimed mass voter irregularities and fraud occurred in the key swing states, however, US state and federal judges have repeatedly rejected those allegations due to failures in their legal proceedings or lack of credible evidence.

Earlier on Monday, US federal judges in Michigan and Georgia rejected the Trump campaign's bid to invalidate votes that would overturn the election. Similar key decisions are expected on Tuesday for similar legal challenges in Arizona and Wisconsin.

Another key decision is expected from the US Supreme Court this week regarding the elections in Pennsylvania. Republican Congressman Mike Kelly has asked the court to block the certification of election results in the battleground state over allegations that state officials violated election laws.

After state election results are certified, the Electoral College will meet virtually on December 14 to cast the official ballots for the US presidential election.

The US Congress will confirm the electoral votes on January 6 followed by Inauguration Day on January 20 when the president-elect and vice president-elect will be sworn in.

In November, Trump authorized the General Services Administration to initiate a formal transition to the Biden team despite continuing to dispute the outcome of the presidential election.

Biden, who has been projected to win by major US media networks, has already announced several picks for his incoming administration. The former vice president has picked Antony Blinken to be Secretary of State, Avril Haines to be Director of National Intelligence, Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be US Ambassador to the United Nations, former top US diplomat John Kerry to be US Special Envoy for Climate, and former Federal Reserve chairwoman Janet Yellen to lead the Treasury Department.

Biden has also picked California Attorney General Xavier Becerra for the position of Health Secretary, Anthony Fauci for the position Chief Medical Adviser on COVID-19 and Rochelle Walensky for director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Biden's pick for Defense Secretary will be announced on Friday and his pick for Attorney General is expected later this week as well. Politico reported near the end of the day on Monday that Biden will nominate former commander of US Central Command, retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin, to be his Secretary of Defense.

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Possible US Sanctions on Turkey Over S-400 to Create Disturbing Conditions - Envoy to NATO

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The possible US sanctions against Turkey over its purchase of the Russian S-400 air and missile defense system would create disturbing conditions and negatively impact bilateral ties, head of the Turkish delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Berat Conkar, said.

"We can make sure that these S-400 systems will not pose any threat to F-35 [jets] or any other NATO systems. Turkey is very sensitive about its NATO responsibilities it has and I can make sure this will continue this way. However, if the sanctions really go through, I am afraid that that may be a game changer," Conkar said. "Among NATO allies, sanctions - even the pronouncement of this kind of sanctions - may create very disturbing conditions and may affect the Turkish-American bilateral relationship in a negative way when Turkey and the United States really need each other very much in the current global conditions."

US lawmakers are expected to vote Tuesday on a defense spending bill. Congress will require the US federal government to impose sanctions on each individual involved in Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 system within 30 days after the new defense spending bill is signed into law.

The legislation also includes a provision that would authorize US Air Force Secretary to use the six Turkish F-35A aircraft that were never delivered to Ankara because Turkey was suspended from the F-35 program.

Conkar said Turkey is as careful as the United States in terms of protecting the security of the NATO assets, including the F-35 jets, and is ready to establish a committee in the alliance to ensure the S-400 will be standalone systems.

"We had to make this purchase just because we were not able to purchase this from our allies," Conkar added.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly said that Ankara was ready to buy US Patriot systems under the condition of technology transfer to Turkey, but adding that the issue of abandoning the S-400 systems was out of the question.

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Biden to Nominate Ex-CENTCOM Chief Austin to Lead Defense Department - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden is expected to nominate former commander of US Central Command, retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin, to be his Secretary of Defense, Politico reported citing three people familiar with the matter.

The report said on Monday that Biden also considered former Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson for the post, but there were concerns over his record on expanding family detention, accelerating deportations, and approving drone strikes against civilians.

The report added that Austin will need a waiver from the US Congress to be considered as a nominee because he has not been out of the military for the required seven years.

Earlier on Monday, Biden told reporters that he will announce his pick for Defense chief on Friday.

In November, Trump authorized the General Services Administration to initiate a formal transition to the Biden team despite continuing legal disputes over the outcome of the presidential election.

Biden, whose victory has been officially certified by the states, already announced other picks for his cabinet.

The former vice president has picked Antony Blinken to be Secretary of State, Avril Haines to be Director of National Intelligence, Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be US Ambassador to the United Nations, former top US diplomat John Kerry to be US Special Envoy for Climate, and former Federal Reserve chairwoman Janet Yellen to lead the Treasury Department.

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US Judge Blocks Trump Administration Restrictions on TikTok - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has blocked the Trump administration from imposing a ban on the video-sharing platform TikTok, which is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance.

"For the foregoing reasons, Plaintiffs' Motion for a Preliminary Injunction is granted as to all the prohibitions listed in the Commerce Identification. An Order will accompany this Memorandum Opinion," the court document said on Monday.

The judge said the Trump administration exceeded its authority in restricting TikTok and described its actions as "arbitrary and capricious."

In August, the Trump administration threatened to ban TikTok in the United States, citing wider concerns about alleged Chinese government spying on data of US citizens. However, the ban had not gone into effect because of the pending litigation.

The ban on TikTok was originally to take effect on September 20, but was later delayed after the administration offered the company a way out by selling itself to a US entity.

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Canada Delegitimizing Venezuelan Elections Amounts to Foreign Meddling - Advocacy Groups

TORONTO, December 7 (Sputnik) - Ottawa's refusal to recognize the results of the Venezuelan parliamentary elections on Sunday amounts to foreign interference and underscores an overreliance on US foreign policy, three Canadian advocacy groups told Sputnik. Ahead of Venezuela's parliamentary elections, Canada, in lockstep with the United States, announced that it would not recognize the results of the elections. Earlier in the day, Ottawa's envoy for the Americas floated the idea of further sanctions against the South American nation. "This statement was expected and is a continuation of Canada's refusal to recognize Venezuelan elections when their allies do not win," Bianca Mugenyi, Director of the Canadian Foreign Policy Institute (CFPI), said.

Mugenyi said the Canadian foreign policy dependence on the US stance is egregious, noting that Sunday's election was of particular significance given that "it undermines any last thread of legitimacy [Juan] Guaido may have had as his position on the National Assembly will expire in January."

Rachel Small, organizer of World BEYOND War's Canadian chapter, said in a written statement that Venezuelan people exercised their sovereignty by participating in a peaceful and democratic election in the face of US imperialism and criminal sanctions and condemned both Washington and Ottawa for refusing to support elections after participating in Guaido's failed attempt at orchestrating a coup a year earlier.

In addition to acknowledgement of the parliamentary elections and an end to Ottawa's campaign of foreign interference, an Ontario based anti-war advocacy group urged the government to rebuild relations with Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and end Canada's sanctions regime against the South American Nation

"We call on the Trudeau government to reverse its position immediately, recognize the outcome of the recent National Assembly elections in Venezuela, lift the coercive economic measures, and normalize relations with the legitimate government of President Maduro," Ken Stone, Treasurer of the Hamilton Coalition to Stop The War said, noting the multi-million dollar bill Canadian taxpayers foot to support regime change efforts.

Stone also stressed the need for independent Canadian foreign policy from the NATO alliance. Venezuela's Simon Bolivar Great Patriotic Pole, the alliance of the country's socialist parties including the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) is leading the elections with 67.6 percent of the vote after 82 percent of the votes have been counted, according to the preliminary results published by the National Electoral Council.

Elections to the National Assembly, Venezuela's unicameral parliament, took place on Sunday, with 107 political forces running for seats. Guaido's opposition bloc refused to participate in the vote, among over 20 other parties.

Officials in Moscow have indicated that they are satisfied with the organization and conduct of the election and the belief is that the renewed parliament of Venezuela will become a platform for dialogue of all political forces.

The United Nations has said it will not take a position on the legitimacy of Venezuela's parliamentary election but will continue encouraging political dialogue.

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Trump to Sign Order Tuesday to Ensure COVID-19 Vaccines for Every American - Official

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump is expected to sign an executive order on Tuesday during his planned Vaccine Summit at the White House to ensure enough COVID-19 vaccine for every American, a senior administration official told reporters.

"Tomorrow, the president is going to be signing an executive order on ensuring access to US government COVID-19 vaccines," the senior official said on Monday evening.

The executive order also mandates that the State Department, US Agency for International Development, US International Development Finance Corporation and the Export-Import Bank work collaboratively in assisting foreign nations with vaccine procurement efforts.

The cost of vaccination will be covered by private health insurance providers and the entirety of the program will be underwritten by the US government, a second administration official said.

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Turkey, US Have Chance to Mend Relations Under New Biden Administration - Envoy to NATO

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Relations between Turkey and the United States stand a chance of improving under the administration of projected US President-elect Joe Biden, head of the Turkish delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Berat Conkar, said.

"Turkey's sensitivities must be understood well and with the new administration coming into the United States," Conkar said on Monday. "With the experience of the President-elect Biden in foreign affairs, I believe that there is a chance for a new dynamics to reset and to mend the relationship."

Conkar said Turkey and the United States must focus on many important issues regarding regional and global security in order to improve bilateral relations.

While both countries have been partners in NATO, today they are in a critical juncture at their relationship, he noted.

Conkar also said that Turkey's position inside NATO has always been critical and that is especially important given the challenges the alliance is facing.

"We are seeing that there is a growing problem of cohesion inside NATO," Conkar said. "When we look at the US-Turkey relationship, which has deteriorated in the last couple of years, there are certain issues, there are certain problems which are basically creating cracks inside NATO." Conkar explained that specifically these issues include the fight against terrorism and added that Turkey is rightfully concerned about the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its Syrian Branch known as People Protection Units (YPG), which have unfortunately been taken very lightly by the NATO allies.

"This is creating important crack inside our alliance," Conkar said.

Major US media networks have projected Democratic nominee Joe Biden to be the winner of the 2020 US presidential election. However, President Donald Trump has said he won the election but victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety.

Trump has sought redress by seeking recounts in some states and filing lawsuits in state and federal courts. Several states have said they did not find evidence of widespread election fraud or substantial irregularities.

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Pfizer, Moderna Will Not Attend Trump's 'Vaccine Summit' - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Pfizer and Moderna, the two major pharmaceutical manufacturers expected to soon receive federal approval for emergency use of their coronavirus vaccines, have turned down invitations by President Donald Trump to attend a "Vaccine Summit" in the White House on Tuesday, US media reported.

Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla and Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel were both invited to attend the gathering, but neither of them will be there, STAT News said on Monday.

The Trump administration has publicly clashed with Pfizer in recent weeks over its involvement in the administration's Operation Warp Speed and the timing of a data release showing its vaccine to be highly effective, the report said.

Trump has repeatedly claimed credit that the new vaccines were developed in record time and for making plans for the vaccines' delivery throughout the United States.

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Biden Says He Will Announce Pick for Defense Secretary on Friday

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Presumed President-elect Joe Biden told reporters that he will announce his pick for US Defense Secretary on Friday.

"I'll have an announcement for you on Wednesday and on Friday... Defense is Friday," Biden said on Monday in response to a question about when will he announce his pick for the positions Secretary of Defense and US Attorney General.

Biden's pick for US Attorney General could be announced on Wednesday, but he did not respond when asked by reporters to clarify.

US media reports have suggested that former Defense Department policy chief Michele Flournoy and retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin are top candidates for the job.

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Congress 'Moving in Right Direction' on COVID-19 Relief Deal - Kudlow

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The odds are improving for the COVID-19 relief bill in the US Congress as lawmakers close in on a \$908 billion bipartisan deal, White House Economic Adviser Larry Kudlow said in a live-streamed interview with the Washington Post.

"We are moving in the right direction on coronavirus stimulus talks, and getting closer", to a deal, Kudlow said on Monday. "The odds are improving for a stimulus bill agreement."

US lawmakers aim to pass the measure before the federal government shuts down on Saturday, media reported.

In March, Congress originally passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act that dispensed \$3 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying US citizens and permanent residents.

Since, congressional Democrats and Republicans disagreed on a successive relief plan. The stalemate was broken last week with the \$908 billion relief bill proposed by a bipartisan group.

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US Puts Russia on Watch List for Alleged Religious Freedom Violations - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 7(Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that the United States placed Russia on its Special Watch List for alleged violations of religious freedom.

"We are also placing the Comoros, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia on a Special Watch List for governments that have engaged in or tolerated "severe violations of religious freedom," the statement said on Monday.

Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were designated as Countries of Particular Concern under the International

Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for engaging in or tolerating "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom."

Pompeo also said that Sudan and Uzbekistan have been removed from the Special Watch List based on significant, concrete progress undertaken by their respective governments over the past year.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 7(Sputnik)

PUTIN-MERKEL TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel held a phone conversation on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, Putin briefed Merkel on the operation of the Russian peacekeeping mission, the Kremlin said on Monday.

* Putin and Merkel agreed to continue working on the settlement in eastern Ukraine in the Normandy format, the Kremlin said.

* Putin and Merkel discussed an incident with Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny in their phone call, a representative of the German cabinet told Sputnik.

IOC BANS LUKASHENKO, OTHER OFFICIALS

* The head of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Thomas Bach said on Monday that the IOC had decided to temporarily ban Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who also heads the country's National Olympic Committee (NOC), from participating in all events under its auspices.

* The IOC measure against Alexander Lukashenko will not affect the performance of Belarusian athletes at the Olympics, Bach said.

VENEZUELA ELECTIONS

* The United States condemns the recent election in Venezuela as being fraudulent, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

* Russia proceeds from the assumption that the new Venezuela parliament will become a platform for dialogue of all political forces, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement on Monday.

* The European Union cannot recognize the results of the Venezuelan parliamentary elections, which failed to reflect the will of the people, High Representative for Foreign Policy Josep Borrell said.

EASTERN UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* A proposal on the extension of the law on the special status on the region of Donbas in eastern Ukraine was submitted to the country's parliament, up for a vote next week, Yaroslav Zheleznyak, a member of Voice political party, said on Monday.

* Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council is likely to approve Plan B on the settlement in eastern Ukraine in the beginning of the next year, the head of Kiev's delegation in the contact group, former president Leonid Kravchuk, told RIA Novosti.

FRENCH COURT RULES ON ALEXANDER VINNIK

* A court in Paris found Russian national Alexander Vinnik guilty of money laundering in a cybercrime case and sentenced him to five years in prison and a fine of 100,000 euros (\$121,000).

* The defense of Vinnik intends to appeal against the verdict of the Paris court, is awaiting the decision of the defendant himself, his lawyer Frederic Belot said.

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New COVID-19 Spike Could Hurt US Economy's V-Shaped Recovery - White House Adviser Kudlow

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The potential for a V-shaped US economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic is being threatened by a resurgence of infections, White House Economic Adviser Larry Kudlow said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, top US epidemiologist Anthony Fauci said the United States is likely to see a major spike in coronavirus infections in mid-January stemming from year-end holidays in 2020. "I'm going to make the case that I think we are in a strong V-shaped recovery," Kudlow said in a live-streamed interview with The Washington Post. "I do believe there are threats to that recovery with respect to the Christmas pops in the virus."

The US economy grew by 33.1 percent in the third quarter, after shrinking by 31.4 percent in the previous three months and 5 percent in the first quarter.

Despite the rebound, the economic outlook for the United States remains dire with a rash of new coronavirus infections reported across a nation with 14.8 million COVID-19 cases since January and more than 282,000 fatalities from that. In recent weeks, national daily hospitalization rates have reached more than 100,000, threatening to overrun the health system, experts said.

US jobs recovery has, meanwhile, stalled to its lowest since the start of pandemic.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than

700,000 jobs were added each month. In November, a mere 245,000 new jobs were registered, the smallest growth since May, when jobs started coming back.

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US Watchdog Accuses Trump's Trade Adviser of Engaging in Prohibited Political Activity

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump's trade adviser Peter Navarro engaged in prohibited political activity by attacking presidential candidate Joe Biden in media appearances and on social platforms prior to the election, the US Office of Special Counsel (OSC) said in a report on Monday.

"OSC's investigation determined that Dr. Navarro violated the Hatch Act's prohibition against using his official authority or influence to affect an election by engaging in political activity during official media appearances and on his official Twitter account," the federal watchdog said. OSC alleged that from May 26 through October 19, 2020, during at least six media interviews where he appeared in the official capacity as Assistant to the President and Director of the Office on Trade and Manufacturing Policy, Navarro repeatedly attacked Biden and/or vice-presidential candidate Kamala Harris.

Among other things, Navarro accused Biden of being "compromised" and susceptible to being "bought" by China and even nicknamed him "Beijing Biden," according to the report.

"On his "@PeterNavarro45" Twitter account, which he often used for official purposes, Dr. Navarro engaged in similar partisan attacks, repeating his "Beijing Biden" nickname for Mr. Biden and accusing him of being "soft" on China and a plagiarist," the report said.

OSC described violations as "knowing and willful" - having received training on the Hatch Act and being aware of the investigation. It said that Navarro was offered an opportunity to respond to the report, but he chose not to do so. The report was submitted to the Trump administration for appropriate action.

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US House to Vote on 1-Week Funding Measure After Failing to Reach Budget Deal - Hoyer

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives is set to consider on December 10 a resolution on budget funding for the duration of a week after lawmakers failed to reach a budget deal, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said on Monday.

"I am disappointed that we have not yet reached agreement on government funding. The House will vote on Wednesday on a one-week CR [continuing resolution] to keep government open while negotiations continue," Hoyer said via Twitter.

The US government may be shutdown at the end of the week if Congress is unable to pass a bill on funding federal agencies.

The last government shutdown, albeit a partial one, occurred between late December 2018 and late January 2019.

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US House Passes Act to Protect Refugees From Hong Kong

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US House approved legislation on Monday designed to help protect refugees from Hong Kong who are fleeing persecution.

The Hong Kong People's Freedom and Choice Act of 2020 was approved after 40 minutes of debate by a voice vote.

Earlier in the day, the Trump administration targeted more than a dozen Chinese officials in a new round of sanctions over Hong Kong, the Department of the Treasury announced.

The bill calls for temporary refuge to Hong Kongers already in the US and expedites applications of those fleeing persecution.

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US House Democrats Slam Trump Administration Move to Approve Arctic Energy Leases - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The head of the US House Natural Resources Committee (HNRC) has protested efforts by the Trump administration to rush through new energy drilling leases in the Arctic before presumptive President-elect Joe Biden can take office, HNRC said in a press release on Monday.

"Chair Raul Grijalva and Representatives Jared Huffman, chair of the Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife, and Alan Lowenthal, chair of the Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, wrote to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt today seeking an explanation of how the Department of the Interior can move forward with a lease sale in the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge," the release said.

The lease sale would be cutting short a comment period and requiring bids to be finalized sooner than the minimum time required under Bureau of Land Management (BLM) regulations, Grijalva said in the letter.

The letter noted that the Coastal Plain lease sale was open to swift reversal should it face a court challenge.

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Trump Campaign Asks Michigan Supreme Court to Weigh Observer Access Case - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The Trump re-election campaign has requested the Michigan Supreme Court to consider its lawsuit alleging observer access violations in the state's election, a court document revealed on Monday.

"President Trump's campaign committee and Eric Ostergren (the Plaintiffs) ask this Court to grant immediate relief under MCR 7.311(E) of the December 4 order of the Michigan Court of Appeals denying their application for leave to appeal the order of the Court of Claims," the court document said.

The Trump campaign wants the Michigan Supreme Court to issue an order claiming state election officials violated observer access laws, but it does not seek to invalidate ballots. Earlier on Monday, a US federal judge rejected another Trump campaign bid to invalidate more than 5.5 million votes in the battleground state over allegations of voter irregularities and fraud. The judge ruled that the Trump campaign waited too long to sue, and the litigation has no standing and is unlikely to succeed on the merits.

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US to Continue Implementing Sanctions Policy Against Venezuela - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to implement its sanctions policy toward Venezuela, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Cuba and Venezuela Carrie Filipetti said on Monday.

"I do think that having a strong combination of carrots and sticks, you know, leverage that we can potentially deploy in negotiation is critically important and this is why we are going to continue with our sanctions policies," Filipetti said during a virtual event at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Filipetti pointed out that the US sanctions policy against Venezuela is one of the few issues that has gained bipartisan support in the United States.

"US sanctions have really helped combat the flows of income from petroleum, from the oil industry in general, and so they turned toward gold, and they turned toward other avenues and so it's critical that we not only cut those off but we also hold those countries responsible who are buying Venezuelan gold, who are involved in those practices," she said.

Filipetti emphasized that the existing policy will continue but will also consider different venues such as holding officials accountable.

"I really do think that the international system has somewhat failed us in this case because we have these wonderful bodies that are there in order to ensure that something like what's going

on in Venezuela doesn't happen anywhere and so that hasn't been successful in ensuring accountability over the last few years," Filipetti said.

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California Partners With Big Tech to Launch COVID-19 Exposure Notification App - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The state of California has teamed up with Apple and Google to launch an application that will notify individuals if they have been exposed to the novel coronavirus, Governor Gavin Newsom said in a statement on Monday.

"CA[ifornia] has partnered with Google and Apple to launch a COVID-19 exposure notification app, CA Notify," Newsom said via Twitter.

Newsom said the application will be launched on Thursday and is fully private and secure.

The announcement came after several sheriffs in California have said they will not enforce Newsom's restrictive measures.

As of Monday, California authorities have reported more than 1.3 million residents have tested positive for the novel coronavirus and more than 19,800 virus-deaths.

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Trump Says Personal Lawyer Giuliani Doing Well After Contracting COVID-19

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump told reporters on Monday that his personal attorney and long-time friend Rudy Giuliani is doing well after testing positive for the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

"I just spoke to him, he's doing very well, no temperature," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office.

Trump said his first telephone call this morning was with Giuliani.

On Sunday, Trump announced via Twitter that his lawyer tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

CNN reported, citing a source, that Giuliani was admitted to Georgetown University Hospital to undergo treatment.

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US NSA Says Russian Hackers Targeting Software Used by Pentagon - Advisory

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US National Security Agency (NSA) on Monday accused Russian hackers of penetrating software used by the Pentagon.

"Russian state-sponsored malicious cyber actors are exploiting a vulnerability in VMware Access and VMware Identity Manager products, allowing the actors access to protected data and abusing federated authentication," an advisory released by the NSA said.

The NSA urged the Department of Defense and other agencies to prioritize mitigation of the vulnerability on affected servers. The exploitation of this vulnerability means that hackers have access to the management interface of the device, it added.

Russia has repeatedly refuted all accusations of state-sponsored hacker attacks on foreign entities.

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Lima Group Condemns Venezuela Election as Being 'Fraudulent' - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The Lima Group said in a statement on Monday that it has condemned the recent election in Venezuela as being fraudulent and is urging the international community to reject the election results.

"We call on the international community to join in the rejection of this fraudulent electoral process and support the efforts of the people of Venezuela for the return of democracy," the statement said.

More than 100 political parties and associations participated in Venezuela's parliamentary election on Sunday. The opposition bloc led by Juan Guaido - a failed coup leader who is backed by the United States - has refused to take part in the election.

The Lima Group said the election took place without guarantees for the democratic process and lacks legality and legitimacy. The Lima Group said it called all interested parties to prioritize Venezuela's interests and urgently commit to supporting a transition process.

The United States and the European Union also characterized the election in Venezuela as being fraudulent.

Russian election observer mission head Igor Ananskikh told Sputnik that the first results of the Venezuelan elections demonstrated the legitimacy of the new National Assembly.

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Third Recount of Georgia Ballots Again Confirms Biden Won Election - State Official

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Georgia officials have confirmed in a third ballot recount that projected President-elect Joe Biden won the presidential election in the battleground state, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said during a news conference on Monday.

"We have now counted legally cast ballots three times and the results remain unchanged," Raffensperger said.

Final results from the state show Biden defeated President Donald Trump by 11,784 votes. On Friday, Trump's team announced that it had filed a motion to nullify the election results in the state of Georgia, saying that there were "tens of thousands" of illegally cast ballots that it had documented in the state.

Earlier on Monday, a US federal judge dismissed the lawsuit from the Trump campaign that sought to overturn the presidential election in the state.

Georgia will remain in the spotlight as the state holds runoff elections on January 5, with Republican Senators David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler facing Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, respectively. Democrats will need to win both of the Senate seats to secure 50, an effective majority considering soon-to-be Vice President Kamala Harris will be casting tie-breaking votes. The Republicans currently control 53 seats.

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US Condemns Venezuela's Election as Being 'Fraudulent' - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the recent election in Venezuela as being fraudulent, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Monday.

"The United States, along with numerous other democracies around the world, condemns this charade which failed to meet any minimum standard of credibility," Pompeo said, calling this election process "fraudulent."

More than 100 political parties and associations participated in Venezuela's parliamentary election on Sunday. The opposition bloc led by Juan Guaido, a failed coup leader who is backed by the United States, has refused to take part in the election.

Pompeo accused the government of President Nicolas Maduro of threatening humanitarian workers and international food distribution programs and said neither he nor the new National Assembly represent the Venezuelan people.

"Neither Maduro nor a new, fraudulently elected National Assembly will represent the legitimate voice of the Venezuelan people, which should be expressed through free and fair presidential elections," he said.

Pompeo added that the United States will continue recognizing Guaido as legitimate leader of Venezuela and urged international community to join Washington in condemning the elections results.

Russian election observer mission head Igor Ananskikh told Sputnik that the first results of the Venezuelan elections demonstrated the legitimacy of the new National Assembly.

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US Designates 14 Chinese Officials in New Sanctions Over Hong Kong - Treasury

* US * TREASURY * SANCTIONS * CHINA *

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted more than a dozen Chinese officials in a new round of sanctions over Hong Kong, the Department of the Treasury announced on Monday.

The 14 designated individuals include Vice-Chairpersons of 13th National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) Dafeng Cai, Jianming Cao, Zhu Chen, Padma Choling and Weihua Wu among others, the Treasury Department said.

In a statement issued on Monday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the actions of the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) neutered the ability of the Hong Kong people to choose their elected representatives.

"Today, the Department of State is holding accountable those responsible for these brazen acts," Pompeo said. "We are designating 14 Vice-Chairpersons of the NPCSC in connection with developing, adopting, or implementing the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The NPCSC voted unanimously to adopt the National Security Law that Beijing has used repeatedly to stifle dissent and arrest those who protest Beijing's oppressive policies."

Pompeo said the designated persons and their immediate family members will be prohibited to travel to the United States, and their assets within US jurisdiction or in the possession or control of US persons will be blocked.

Pompeo also said that US persons are generally prohibited from dealing with these individuals. In November, the US sanctioned four Chinese nationals for implementing China's national security law in Hong Kong and cracking down on protesters.

In June 2019, mass protests erupted in Hong Kong as a reaction to a proposed bill that would allow people to be extradited from the city to mainland China. The demonstrations continued for weeks and turned violent even after the unpopular measure was withdrawn in September 2019. Beijing said that the situation in Hong Kong was a result of foreign interference in China's domestic affairs.

To stabilize the situation in the city, the Chinese government in late June enacted the national security law in Hong Kong. The new legislation banned separatist and terrorist activities, along with any form of foreign interference in Hong Kong. It provoked a wave of criticism in Hong Kong and abroad with US President Donald Trump threatening to sanction both Chinese and Hong Kong officials for allegedly undermining the city's autonomy.

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US Urges EU to Adopt Rights Sanctions Under New Framework 'As Soon as Possible' - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US government welcomes the European Union's move to adopt a new global framework to impose sanctions in response to human rights violations and urges the bloc to make new designations as soon as possible, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Monday.

"The United States welcomes the European Union's adoption of its global human rights sanctions framework," Pompeo said. "Europe will have a steadfast partner in the United States on this program, and we encourage the EU to adopt its first designations as soon as possible."

Pompeo described the new framework as a "groundbreaking accomplishment" that would serve to further protect human rights on a global basis.

"The EU's new measures give its member states a powerful tool to promote accountability for human rights abuse on a global scale. The new authorities will complement the ongoing efforts of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada to sanction human rights abusers," Pompeo said.

The United States would continue to seek out additional allies and partners to use all the tools at its disposal to deny human rights abusers the benefit of access to the US and international financial systems, Pompeo added.

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Trump Made Last Attempt to Sow Chaos in Cuba by Funding Anti-Gov't Protests - Activist

LONDON, December 7 (Sputnik) – The outgoing US administration appeared to be stoking violent clashes inside Cuba by allegedly funding anti-government attacks and protests to pave way for direct intervention by the US on the Caribbean island, Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC) director, Rob Miller, told Sputnik on Monday.

The CSC director's statement comes in the wake of recent provocations by the so-called San Isidro Movement, a Cuban art collective, alleged to be sponsored by Washington, that recently held a protest in Havana to demand the release of Denis Solis, a rapper who was sentenced to eight months in jail for insulting a police officer. After his arrest, Cuban authorities released a video in which Solis admitted that he was in contact with people in the United States who finance violent acts against Cuba.

"The timing of these interventions is an attempt to force a violent confrontation inside Cuba, which in turn could be used to support a direct intervention from the Trump administration in the dangerous last throws of the Presidency," Miller said in an e-mailed interview with Sputnik.

They also showed images showing a top US diplomat in Havana using an embassy car to transport members of the San Isidro anti-government movement around the city, citing the act as an open interference in Cuba's domestic affairs, and offered other purported evidence that some in the art movement have ties with the US government.

In his opinion, the outgoing president Trump also wants to send a clear message to the incoming administration of the alleged winner of the presidential election, Joe Biden, that the US aggressive Cuba policy must continue.

"These latest manoeuvres, clearly orchestrated by the United States, are unfortunately the latest in a very long history of aggressions against Cuba," the CSC director said, adding that the "US government makes no secret of its involvement handing out millions of dollars each year for anti-Cuban 'regime change' projects in and outside the island."

The director of the organization that campaigns in the UK against the 60-year-old US economic, financial and commercial blockade of Cuba and for the Cuban peoples' right to self-determination and sovereignty also called on all solidarity movement in the world to focus their energies on demanding the lifting of the unilateral [punitive] measures, which he said is the central obstacle to Cuba's development.

After the San Isidro protest, the Cuban government agreed to hold a peaceful dialogue over freedom of expression with all the artists concerned but made it clear that it would not accept any preconditions from those it described as "mercenaries on the US government's payroll."

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Biden Taps California AG Becerra for US Health Secretary, Fauci for COVID-19 Chief Adviser

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Projected US President-elect Joe Biden has picked California Attorney General Xavier Becerra for the position Health Secretary, Anthony Fauci for the position Chief Medical Adviser on COVID-19 and Rochelle Walensky for director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Biden team said in a statement on Monday.

"This deeply qualified, diverse team will be ready on day one to contain the COVID-19 pandemic; ensure the safe, free and equitable distribution of vaccines; make sure every American has access to affordable, quality health care; and guard against the full range of health threats facing our nation," the statement said.

Should Biden become president, Fauci will also continue in his role as Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in addition to being Chief Medical Adviser.

Other key nominations and appointments of Biden's health team include Vivek Murthy for Surgeon General, Marcella Nunez-Smith for COVID-19 Equity Task Force Chair and Jeff Zients for Coordinator of the COVID-19 Response and Counselor to the President, the release said.

In addition, Biden has taped former White House and Defense Department senior adviser Natalie Quillian to join the COVID-19 Response as Deputy Coordinator, the release added.

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US Condemns Venezuela's Election as Being 'Fraudulent' - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the recent election in Venezuela as being fraudulent, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Monday.

"The United States, along with numerous other democracies around the world, condemns this charade which failed to meet any minimum standard of credibility," Pompeo said, calling this election process "fraudulent."

More than 100 political parties and associations participated in Venezuela's parliamentary election on Sunday. The opposition bloc led by Juan Guaido, a failed coup leader who is backed by the United States, has refused to take part in the election.

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US Urges EU to Adopt Rights Sanctions Under New Framework 'As Soon as Possible' - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US government welcomes the European Union's move to adopt a new global framework to impose sanctions in response to human rights violations and urges the EU to make new designations as soon as possible, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Monday.

"The United States welcomes the European Union's adoption of its global human rights sanctions framework.," Pompeo said. "Europe will have a steadfast partner in the United States on this program, and we encourage the EU to adopt its first designations as soon as possible."

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US Designates 14 Chinese Officials in New Sanctions Over Hong Kong - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted more than a dozen Chinese officials in a new round of sanctions over Hong Kong, the Department of the Treasury announced on Monday.

The 14 designated individuals include Vice-Chairpersons of 13th National People's Congress Standing Committee Dafeng Cai, Jianming Cao, Zhu Chen, Padma Choling and Weihua Wu among others, the Treasury Department said.

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G7 Finance Ministers Discuss Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Finance ministers and central banks from the Group of Seven (G7) countries met virtually on Monday to discuss coordinated responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and resolved to prevent illicit activity and to regulate crypto currencies among others, the US Treasury Department said in a statement.

"The G7 Finance Ministries and Central Banks remain in regular contact and continue to coordinate on timely and effective actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic," the statement read. "The Ministers and Governors discussed domestic and international economic responses underway and strategies to achieve a robust recovery throughout the global economy. They also discussed ongoing responses to the evolving landscape of crypto assets and other digital assets and national authorities' work to prevent their use for malign purposes and illicit activities. There is strong support across the G7 on the need to regulate digital currencies."

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Virginia Military Institute Begins Removing Confederate Statue

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The Virginia Military Institute has started removing a statue of confederate General Stonewall Jackson from its grounds in order to relocate it to the Virginia Museum of the Civil War and New Market Battlefield State Historical Park, the institute announced in a release on Monday.

"Virginia Military Institute began the process today of relocating the Stonewall Jackson statue from the front of barracks to the Virginia Museum of the Civil War and New Market Battlefield State Historical Park," the release said. "Contractors will remove the bronze statue today and spend the next several days repairing the stone pedestal before it is moved from its current location."

The institute noted in the release that the relocation will cost \$209,000, which will be covered by VMI's facility maintenance and operations account.

"Once all the parts have arrived in New Market, VMI personnel will work to install the statue in the roundabout in front of the Virginia Museum of the Civil War," the institute said. "The estimated completion is summer / fall 2021."

The institute also said in the release that sculptor Moses Ezekiel - VMI's first Jewish cadet and a veteran of the Battle of New Market - gave the statue to VMI in 1912.

Statues of several historical figures associated with racism have been removed, toppled or defaced across the United States amid nationwide protests fueled by multiple police-involved killings of African Americans.

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US Federal Judge Upholds Election Results in Michigan - Court Order

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – A US federal court has upheld projected President-elect Joe Biden's victory over President Donald Trump in the election in the state of Michigan, a court order showed on Monday.

"With nothing but speculation and conjecture that votes for President Trump were destroyed, discarded or switched to votes for [Joseph] Biden, Plaintiffs' equal protection claim fails," US District Judge Linda Parker said in the order. "The People have spoken."

The judge said the Trump team was "far from likely" to succeed its goal of forcing the state to de-certify its election results.

"In fact, this lawsuit seems to be less about achieving the relief Plaintiffs seek - as much of that relief is beyond the power of this Court - and more about the impact of their allegations on People's faith in the democratic process and their trust in our government," the judge said.

Michigan officially certified Biden's victory in the state on November 24, giving him all 16 of the state's Electoral College votes.

On Friday, California certified its results, bringing Biden's tally of pledged electors in the Electoral College to 279, with just 270 votes needed to win. Most major media outlets have projected that Biden will win 306 votes once all 50 states have certified their results. The Electoral College vote is scheduled to take place on Monday, December 14.